DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 045 043 HE 001 881

TITLE	Law School Admission Test Council Statement on Pass-Fail Grading Systems as Endorsed by the Council of the Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar of the American Bar Association.
PUB DATE	27 Oct 70
NOTE	2p.
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.20
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement, *Admission (School), College Graduates, Evaluation, Grade Point Average, *Grade Prediction, Grading, *Higher Education, *Law Schools, *Pass Fail Grading

ABSTRACT

Law schools traditionally have relied on the undergraduate grade-point average (GPA) and the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) to determine admission policies. The adoption by an increasing number of colleges and universities of pass-fail grading systems has some implications for the law school admission process. This statement examines some of the effects of the pass-fail system upon graduates seeking admission to law school. With the absence of the GPA, prediction of success must be based upon the LSAT score, which is not as accurate a predictor as when combined with the GPA. When a transcript contains some conventional grades and some pass-fail grades, it is assumed that the student chose conventional grades in courses where he expected to do well. The general implication of the increased use of pass-fail grading is that law school admissions committees will place an increased reliance upon the LSAT score, a greater reliance than either the Council or the law school admissions committee would like. (AF)

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LAW SCHOOL ADMISSION TEST COUNCIL STATEMENT ON PASS-FAIL GRADING SYSTEMS AS ENDORSED BY THE COUNCIL OF THE SECTION OF LEGAL EDUCATION AND ADMISSIONS TO THE BAR OF THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION
1970

The adoption by an increasing number of colleges and universities of pass-fail or similar grading systems for some or all of their students work has implications for the law school admissions process. When a student with a transcript bearing such grades seeks to enter law school, law school admissions committees will be deprived of data that has served them well in the past in making the admissions decision. In the belief that college and university faculties and administrations who are considering conversion of a conventional grading system to a pass-fail or some variant system may be interested in the possible effect of such grading systems upon their graduates who seek admission to law school, the Law School Admission Test Council issues this statement.

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) was developed more than twenty years ago in response to an expressed need of law schools for additional data upon which to base their admissions decisions. Validity studies conducted over the years demonstrate that the LSAT score contributes significantly to the prediction of an applicant's grades in law school and thus aids in the making of the admissions decision. These studies show that the LSAT score and the undergraduate grade-point average are the two best quantitative predictors, and that when they are used together they are better than either used separately. College grades represent both academic competence and achievement; the LSAT score largely indicates academic competence--the kind relevant to the study of law. The academic achievement of an applicant for law school indicates the extent of his preparation and motivation for the study of law. The academic achievement of an applicant for law school indicates the extent of his preparation and motivation for the study of law. It is apparent, then, that college grades make a significant contribution to prediction of law school grades that is not supplied by the LSAT score.

Where an applicant for admission to law school submits a transcript in which all or virtually all of his grades are on a pass-fail basis, and submits no other indication of his level of achievement in college, the admissions committee can make little specific use of his college work in predicting his law school grades. This means that this prediction must be based upon the LSAT score, even though the committee would much prefer not to place sole reliance on the test scores in making this prediction. Even when such a transcript is supplemented by a narrative evaluation of the applicant by several of his teachers and deans, the committee can make only limited use of the college work

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in predicting performance in law school. Like interviews, these evaluations give the committee some help in making the admissions judgment, but they are largely helpful in deciding which risks to take and which to reject.

Where the applicant for admission to law school submits a transcript containing some conventional grades and some pass-fail grades, the admissions committee can develop a grade-point average for that portion of the student's college work bearing the conventional grades. However, many admissions officers will not feel justified in assigning to that average the conventional weight. They may well assume that the student chose to receive a conventional grade in those courses in which he gauged his probabilities for a premium grade to be good. This indicates that his grade-point average so developed will overstate his academic competence and achievement as compared with the average of a student whose grades are all conventional. Furthermore, the committee may reasonably assume that the applicant did not make the same effort in the courses graded on a pass-fail basis as he did in those graded on the conventional basis. In short, a grade-point average based only upon the limited part of a student's work in which conventional grades were assigned seems to overstate in a compound way the student's general academic ability and achievement. Therefore, it is understandable that many admissions officers are already discounting such a grade-point average, and discounting it more if there is a large proportion of pass-fail grades.

The Council recognizes that the increased use of the pass-fail grading system--or some variant thereof--will mean that law school admissions committees and officers will place an increased reliance upon the LSAT score, a greater reliance than either the Council or law school admissions committee would like. The Council recognizes that there are many educational considerations to be taken into account by the faculty and administration in determining the appropriate grading system for that college or university. The Council, of course, respects the authority and judgment of the college and university faculty and administration in making that decision. The Law School Admission Test Council offers this statement concerning the effect of pass-fail grades upon the proper evaluation of a college graduate's application for admission to law school only in the hope that it may be useful to college faculties and administrations in determing what grading system to use.

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mjh October 27, 1970